

Troy II: re-fighting and re-writing the *Iliad* in the *Aeneid*

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Virgil's contemporaries and even the characters in the Aeneid think of it as a sequel to and even a remake of the Iliad, but how does that affect how we read the poem? Among other things, it is a way for Roman poetry to try to outdo Greek, and for Rome's ancestors, the Trojans, to replay the Trojan war recast in the role of the winners, but does the end of the poem make it even better than the original? Compare the end of the Iliadic Aeneid with Oliver Taplin's discussion of the original, Iliad 24, on pages 1–3.

Sequels will be made as long as people want to know what happened next. As readers of books and watchers of films, we want more of the same, but we also, paradoxically, want it to be different. If the sequel is exactly the same, why not just stick with the original? We want a sequel to be the same but different, and if possible, to be even better than the original. As a character in *Scream 2*, a film very self-conscious of its own status as a sequel, says, 'There are certain rules that one must abide by in order to create a successful sequel. Number one: the body count is always bigger. Number two: the death scenes are always much more elaborate'. A sequel needs to deliver not just more of the same, but more of more of the same.

Even better than the original

There's not much question that the *Aeneid* is a sequel to the *Iliad*. In terms of plot, it tells us what happened next after the Trojan War. It was designed to hold the central place in Roman culture which the *Iliad* (and *Odyssey*) held in Greek, and, just as all of Roman literature is a sort of follow-up to Greek, so the relationship between Homer's and Virgil's epics is that of original and sequel. Virgil's contemporaries were in no doubt that this was going to be a sequel, even better than the original. Propertius excitedly wrote that 'something greater than the *Iliad* is being born'. And, according to the ancient literary rules of *aemulatio*, or one-upmanship, Virgil sets about making sure that his sequel is even greater than the original, even down to the pettiest details. Where Achilles chases Hector three times around the walls of Troy, Aeneas chases Turnus five times around the Latin plain. Virgil is serious about this being a superior sequel and he neglects nothing to make it so.

As well as one-upmanship, Virgil still has to make sure that he is providing his readers with a recognizably Homeric experience, though one that is still different enough to be satisfying. Various characters point out how similar the events, especially in the second half of the poem, are going to be to those of the *Iliad*. The Sibyl wails that there will be another Simois and Xanthos (Troy's rivers), another Greek camp, another Achilles, and, just as with Helen, the cause of the war will again be a foreign bride. Venus goes even further in the council of the gods when, bitterly sarcastic at Juno's stirring up of the war, she says that the Trojans might as well go through the whole Trojan war again, but at least let them do it in Troy. The word she uses for 'relive the fall of Troy' is *reuoluere*, as if she were re-winding a papyrus scroll of the *Iliad* ready to tell the same story all over again. These plot strands are going to be so similar to the original, that we are almost talking about, not a sequel, but a remake.

We'll always have Paris

The key to a successful remake is in the casting. Fond memories of Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka can be safely laid to rest when Johnny Depp's weird Michael-Jackson-style man-child takes over the chocolate factory, but cast an ageing, paunchy Sylvester Stallone in the Michael Caine role, and a remake *Get Carter* is doomed. Characters in the *Aeneid* have a very clear and strong sense of which parts they want to play, and which parts they want to cast other people in, especially the leading man, Aeneas.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most popular role earmarked for Aeneas to play is that of Paris. Iarbas, the African chief whom Dido refused to marry, complains to his father Jupiter that Aeneas is another Paris – effeminate, decadent, and, most importantly, coming over here and stealing our women (he forgets the minor detail that, unlike Helen and Menelaus, Dido isn't 'his woman').

Once the Trojans reach Italy, people are queuing up to give Aeneas the Orlando Bloom part. Juno imagines Aeneas as a second Paris who will doom a second Troy. Latinus' wife Amata thinks that Aeneas is coming over to steal away her daughter Lavinia, just like Paris, 'the Phrygian shepherd', did with Helen. Finally, Turnus depicts himself, not as another Menelaus to Aeneas' Paris, but, in the best sequel tradition of being even better than the original, a new, improved version. It won't take him ten years to defeat the Trojans and he won't have to use trickery, skulking in a wooden horse.

One reason why his enemies are so quick to cast Aeneas as Paris is ethnic prejudice. The Trojans are an Eastern people and, in Greek and Roman eyes, that means luxury, effeminacy, and cowardice; Paris is the classic example of the luxurious, effeminate, cowardly 'Oriental'. Virgil constantly probes the question as to whether Aeneas and his companions are more like these stereotyped Trojans or like the tough, manly Romans who will be descended from them.

The other reason is one of legitimizing the war, of establishing who's right and who's wrong. If Aeneas is Paris and Lavinia is Helen, then Turnus is entirely justified in fighting for his lawful bride like a new Menelaus. Unfortunately for him, there is another remake being made and the casting is very different. Aeneas' voyage to Italy is a return, a *nostos*, to the homeland of his ancestor Dardanus; Lavinia, though he has never met her, is his divinely appointed bride, as much his wife as if they had been twenty years married. So Virgil the casting director wants Aeneas as Odysseus, coming back to claim his Penelope. That only leaves one part for Turnus: the suitors – in the wrong and doomed to die.

Do we get to win this time, sir?

But the *Aeneid* is not just a remake of the *Odyssey*. Turnus is quite right that we're in another *Iliad*; where he makes his mistake is in the casting. When he attacks the Trojan camp, he thinks he is playing Achilles, attacking a new Troy that is doomed to fall like the old one. What he doesn't realize is that he is actually playing Hector, and he is not attacking a new Troy but a new Greek camp. This recasting, of course, means disaster for Turnus. Like Hector, he will kill his enemy's best friend, and like Hector, he will be killed in revenge.

It's not just Turnus who is affected by this recasting. The Trojans have long been typecast as losers – it's what they do. They are taunted with the tag 'twice-captured Trojans', because their city was sacked first by Hercules and then by Agamemnon. And now it looks as though it is all going to happen again: another war, another defeat, and another sack of Troy. But if their camp is not a new Troy but a new Greek camp, that means that, in this new *Iliad*, they get to be the winners.

In the film *Rambo*, the Vietnam veteran played by Sylvester Stallone is being sent back to rescue prisoners of war. In this sequel to *First Blood*, where Rambo was tortured by the trauma of defeat in Vietnam, he asks his commanding officer, 'Sir, do we get to win this time?' Rambo wants a sequel which will be like the first film, but where he gets to come out on top, where he can repair the traumas of what he has experienced in the past. In the same way, the Trojans don't just get to win this time, they get to do to their enemies what has been done to them, and their enemies suffer the setbacks which they have suffered. In their final duel, Turnus tries to throw a rock at Aeneas, just as Diomedes did in the *Iliad*, but he fails, just as *Aeneas* did in the *Iliad*. Instead, the spear, which Aeneas throws at Turnus and which injures him in the leg, is compared to a rock, just like the one which Diomedes used to dislocate Aeneas' hip. Turnus doesn't sack the 'Troy' that is the Trojan camp, but Aeneas, to force Turnus to face him in single combat, attacks Latinus' city just like the Greeks attacking Troy. Most clearly of all, the final duel isn't Achilles chasing and killing Trojan Hector, but Trojan Aeneas chasing and killing Turnus.

The twist in the tale

This is all very well for the Trojans, and it's obviously important for an epic which glorifies the foundation of the Roman people to show their ancestors as victorious over their enemies, just as they would be in the centuries to come. But the *Aeneid* is supposed to be a new, improved *Iliad*, even better than the original. We have already seen Aeneas behaving like a gung-ho, death-or-glory Homeric hero in book 2, and his journey has been not just from Troy to Italy, but from the values and ideals of an Achilles to a different sort of heroism, one based on duty and self-sacrifice. One of the things which makes the final scene so disturbing is that Aeneas is *too* like Achilles. Yes, he gets to win this time, but in the final analysis, he isn't the wrathful son of Peleus, and perhaps we don't expect him to kill his Hector in revenge for the death of his Patroclus. But he does.

This is where the story ends, which is the final twist in the remake. Achilles' killing of Hector is followed by the almost unbearably moving scene in which he and Priam recognize each other's common lot as mortals, each seeing in the other the son and the father they have lost or left behind. Virgil doesn't reshoot this final scene. As Turnus dies, we don't know what's going to happen next. Reconciliation, which is if anything *more* important for the Trojans and Latins, who are to form one people, is absent. We might assume that there will be a touching scene, off-camera, where old Daunus comes, Priam-like, and is reconciled with Aeneas, but it isn't described, and the enduring image we are left with is of Aeneas, inflamed with fury, burying his sword in Turnus, whose life goes complaining about the injustice down to the shadows. The Trojans have got to win this time, but is the result for Rome and Italy really an improvement on the original?

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